Sleeping factories, jamborees in city malls, abridged flyovers and the speed of mal-development in Kolkata

Madhuja Mukherjee*
Department of Film Studies, University of Jadavpur, India

Abstract

This paper presents the multiplicity of a south-Asian city namely Kolkata, East India, and examines the conflicting nature of (mal)-development in a post-colonial city. It closely reads the ways in which disparate 'sub-cities' coexist and persist. First, it hopes to fill the gaps within the studies of urban cultures and Kolkata. Secondly, it addresses the city's development over the years and its transformations especially during the current period. By using the shifts as a backdrop, this paper particularly deliberates upon the drives towards economic liberalization and evolving global cultures, and the emergence of city-malls on defunct factory premises. Thus, it analyses a unique contemporary phenomenon, that is the growth of the South-City mall and Housing Complex as an economic, cultural, and visual rupture within our post-colonial experiences. In conclusion, it brings out the volatile relations between the city-mall and its adjacent slum areas.

Keywords: *Kolkata, Post-coloniality, Development, City-mall, Urban-cultures,*

Kolkata.

I would like to begin with a brief introduction to the works of the contemporary Indian painter Sudhir Patwardhan in order to show how unplanned growth of post-colonial cities (especially in the sub-continent) may be described as a sign of 'mal-development' and disorder.[43] Patwardhan's paintings like 'Town' (1984) or 'Station Road' (1996) illustrate the densely populated cities, the massive over-growth of housing complexes, fly-overs crouching over old dilapidated buildings, the existence of slums underneath, puddles of muddy water, drains, the vibrant presence of peoples, auto-rickshaws and dogs. Patwardhan has, indeed, with exceptional vigour shown the history of mal-development in our country. It is within such contexts that the question of 'abridged' flyover comes up. For instance, with the turn of the century, the (local Left) Government had planned and consequently commissioned a series of flyovers to be built in Kolkata in order to facilitate reform and change. Therefore, especially during Left-Front's last phase (2006-2011), and during the past few years, the city has encountered perpetual road blocks due to the construction of new fly-overs as well, because of the construction of additional metro-rail stations (which are tied to multiple legal disputes and repeated halting of construction). Moreover, during March 2013, a section of the *Ultadanga* flyover in North Kolkata came off the hinges and dropped into the small stream flowing underneath it.[44] That part of the bridge has remained in the stream thereafter (until now), since its removal requires certain

---

[43] See K. Zitzewitz (2009)
[44] See http://www.telegraphindia.com/1130303/jsp/frontpage/story_16627215.jsp#.Uf6GqbQ6bwc

expertise and equipment. Consequently, the said section of the city now appears like Patwardhan's paintings and demonstrates the total lack of overall planning. This incident also triggered the temporary stalling of bridge building in Kolkata, thereby producing a crisscross of unfinished bridges.

Fig. 1: 'Abridged' Fly-overs: The Ultadanga flyover in North Kolkata

Introduction: Contexts of Jamboree in City Malls

During the 18th and the 19th Centuries Kolkata was designed as a city primarily for the benefit of colonial government.[45] However, the somewhat well designed city transformed radically after Independence and partition.[46] Endless streams of refugees came to Kolkata, thereby throwing up serious housing problems.[47] The Kolkata streets, which were previously marked with colonial grandeur, became a glaring example of the history of largest immigration in South-Asia. From the 'city of sahibs' and Bengali 'intellectuals', in a short span of time, Kolkata became a 'city of refugees'. The architecture and maps of the city changed as the 'South' of Kolkata was extended to accommodate the refugees. [48]

Eventually, the southern sections of the city got filled with refugee colonies, small factories, and lines of make shift shops and houses. The South-City mall is located on what used to be *Usha* Factory on Prince Anwar Shah Road, and is close to the *Masjid* built in honour of the revolutionary King Tipu Sultan. *Usha* was in fact one of the big factories in Kolkata. It was owned by Jay Engineering Works, and since the nineteen fifties it produced electrical consumers' articles (particularly sewing machines). Its labour force comprised people from neighbouring provinces, as well as refugees from Bangladesh. Usha Factory also produced a fervent trade union movement. However, in 2003 it was declared 'sick' or unprofitable, and was made defunct. It was then sold off to a real estate consortium. The factory was bulldozed; large water bodies were filled up with rubbish, and the construction of the South-City began around 2004. While the project is more or less complete now, on the land of this defunct factory stands an

---

[45] See P. Thankappan Nair (2005)

[46] 2,58,000 migrants sought shelter in West Bengal after the partition in 1947. This increased by 5,90,000 people in 1948, and by 1,82,000 people in 1949. The census of 1951 put the Kolkata population as 2.7 Million. And, by 1961 the slum population was roughly about 6,50,000. Many of the refugees worked in unorganised sectors, most of which were drastically different from their traditional occupations. See Sumit Sarkar (1984).

[47] This resulted in 'encroaching', and establishment of 'colonies' with names like *Shaktigarh*, *Bijoygarh* etc. By 1949, there were forty such colonies in the southeast of Kolkata. Many of these colonies were set up near Prince Anwar Shah Road.

[48] See Nirmal Kumar Bose (1965)

overwhelming and large shopping mall or the South-City mall cum housing estate that highlights our economic shifts from a rambling industrial state to an arguably emergent post-industrial condition.[49]

This paper, however, in not a study in economic and political history or urban sociology, the approach here is interdisciplinary, as it primarily aspires to explore the transformations of our spaces and places, the memories lanes and the enduring images from the perspective of Cultural Studies and visual anthropology. Thus, I use images (films, photographs, posters etc.), and the information found in public domain (such as news papers, blogs, websites etc.) as sources to understand Kolkata's transmutations through the colonial period until its present state. I specifically study one particular aspect of the present, that is, the emergence of the South-City mall and its tremendous popularity. Appearing like a large ship, the 'South-City' consists of new housing (Kolkata's tallest buildings), and is located on the one hand near slums (or Muslim ghettos), and on the other, near Bengali Hindu middle-class houses. Along Prince Anwar Shah Road, there is a makeshift bazaar selling fish and vegetables, old grocery, sweetmeat shops, a wine shop (named 'Solace') and a single cinema theatre (ironically named 'Navina' or New). The locality is virtually inundated with huge billboards, particularly with posters of popular films, of both Bollywood blockbusters as well as of cheaply made local productions. I examine this heterogeneous character of the city, the conflicts of development, and the ways in which 'sub-cities' can coexist. I study the South-City mall in Kolkata as an economic, cultural, and visual rupture within our social experiences. Thus, conclusively, I analyse the overpowering nature of the mall façade, it's glazed and glassy interiors and review the phenomenon of 'being present and seen' in the mall.[50] In other words, this paper comments on the multiplicity of urban life and the unprecedented contemporary developments.

Fig. 2: Google map indicating the South City and its adjacent area

A city with a past

While India became independent in 1947, and two nations were produced on the basis of religion, Bengal and Punjab provinces experienced world's largest forced migration. Effectively, post-independence Kolkata was transformed for once and all. The city was clearly not built to manage an inflow of refugees of this magnitude. People encroached upon vacant lands, on lands besides the railway tracks, on footpaths and so on, producing what is known as *jabar dhakhal* (forcefully captured) colonies and thereby stretching the city limits particularly southwards. Throughout the political movements of 1967 (radical Ultra-Left or 'Naxalite' movement) up till

---

[49] Also see Anustup Basu (2011) on narratives of defunct factories.
[50] See Bella Dicks (2003)

1977, when the Left Front Government eventually came to power in Bengal, these 'colonies' became a stronghold of Left and radical politics.

Fig. 3: *Chinnamul* (1951) and the uncanny image of the refugee. DVD image.

Nevertheless, while there are a range of historical studies on 19th Century Kolkata, enquiries into the political history of Kolkata from the partition years to the political upheavals of the late sixties and early seventies are rare and far between,[51] and are conspicuous by their absence. In this context, cinema becomes an important visual evidence of the changing cityscapes. For instance, *Chinnamul* (*Rootless*, Nimai Ghosh, 1951) was the sole cinematic document of partition and immigration. Likewise, filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak in his essay on 'Film Making' laments about the 'lost landscape', and the 'lost faces' and the 'lost language'.[52] Furthermore, in Mrinal Sen's films, this post-colonial, the post-partition ravaged city, with refugees, beggars, street dogs, footpaths, dustbins, hi-drains etc., re-emerge with much verve. Indeed, the beginning of Sen's of *Interview* (1970) shows these emergent spaces; alternatively, in *Calcutta 71*(1972), the young political activist chased by the police is shown running through the excessively narrow Kolkata by lanes (such lanes are fatefully named 'Serpentine Lanes').

Fig. 4: The city bazaar in *Interview* (1970). DVD image

---

[51] See Joya Chatterjee, (1994)
[52] See *Chitrabikshan* (Bengali), 1984, no. 18, pp. 1-2.

The city in a new light

After the Left Front Government was elected to power in Bengal in 1977, one of its key successes was the land reform programme and a populist mobilisation of the working class people.[53] Yet, within the framework of socialist activities, there were significant shifts in the economic policies of both the Congress Government at the centre,[54] and Left Government in West Bengal. In Kolkata for instance, the stretch from Jadavpur to Garia in the Southern sections, which were dotted with small-scale factories like Bengal Lamp, Sulekha (ink) factory, Dabur etc., have now become defunct and are in the process of becoming big housing complexes with shopping malls.[55]

Arjun Appadurai (1990) has written about *ethnoscapes* (spaces produced through inflow of people, like immigrants etc.,), *technoscapes* (inflow of technology etc.,), *finanscapes* (flow of global capital etc.,) *mediascapes* (the 'repertoires of images and information'), and *ideoscapes* (ideological shifts connected to western world-views), as he elaborates on the Global/Local dichotomy. However, more important perhaps, is this proposed study of the *cityscape* along with the *structural changes*, which occur when immigration happens; or when the physical and architectural transformations take place (with the globalisation of economy and culture), and at the time when flyovers, multi-storeyed buildings, or shopping malls are built by erasing old houses, parks and water bodies and when when neon signs, digital billboards etc., are erected like patchworks in the blue sky. Clearly, as David Harvey (2005) shows, a neoliberal state 'surrenders to the global market', and favours 'governance by elites'. While India is not a neoliberal 'state' per say, its neoliberal aspirations and moves are self-evident. For example, in 2007 when the Government in Bengal tried to set-up chemical hubs (in association with Multinational companies) in the villages of Medinipur, a forceful resistance came primarily from the civil society, just as the peasants fought against land acquisition. It is within such frameworks of uneven social developments that,[56] I wish to consider the *spatial* function of global cultures.

South-City in the South of the city

Fig. 5: The mall façade and the ship like protruding structure, photograph by the author.

---

[53] See A. V Banerjee et al (2002)

[54]The present Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, (who was earlier the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India) during his tenure as Finance Minister in the early nineties, was instrumental in implementing neo-liberal policies and opening its door for the MNCs.

[55] The eastern part of Kolkata now referred to as the 'New Town' can truly be studied as the emergent 'Global' Kolkata, where housing estates, flyovers are cropping up and wide meandering roads crisscross the area, which were earlier agricultural low land.

[56] For further deliberations on the point of Indian modernity and its uneven growth see Partha Chatterjee, (1997)

The 'South-City', has been described as a city within the city. At the gate of the colossal structure is the shopping mall, with an awe-inspiring façade. Built on 31-acres of land, the 35-storeyed residential buildings (with high-speed elevators) are the tallest buildings in the city (and eastern India). Technical innovations like the use of shear walls instead of columns were required for such tall buildings because of the soil quality of the city.[57] Opposite this South-City, is a predominantly Hindu middle class locality (namely Jodhpur Park), and a little further there is a Hospital. On South-City's left there is the slum-area, which comprises largely Muslims. Further down, there is a College, a single theatre, a flyover (towards the city's largest Lake), a Mosque and beyond that a cemetery. In fact, the Mosque structure, Gulam Muhammed Shah Mosque built in 1830s, and the cemetery ground is within half a kilometre of South-City. The near-by slums, named Masjid Para and Rajendra Prasad colony (after India's first President), occupy the crowded main streets (which are usually jammed during Saturdays and Sundays) along with its adjacent areas, and use it for bathing and washing, and thus, in the process highlight the deep ruptures within our social changes. [58]

Fig. 6: '24 hours Foreign Exchange' and Local shops, photograph by the author.

Fig. 7: Masjid-para slum area on Prince Anwar Shah Road, photograph by the author.

---

[57] Also see http://www.southcityprojects.com/index.html
[58] Also see Moinak Biswas (2010) on issues of land acquisition, resistance and popular culture.

The South-City constructed by the Merlin Group on the grounds of the defunct Usha Factory (which employed about 1,600 people), was designed by a USA based company, while a company based in Singapore executed the 'landscape design'. Besides housing eastern India's largest shopping mall, with 6 screen multiplexes, the project also includes swimming pools, a school, and multi-storeyed car parks (for 800 cars) etc. The total investment for this project was about seventy million INR; supposedly it can employ up to 10,000 people and generate ten Million INR through taxes. Non-Resident Indians have booked more than twenty percent of the flats, and the prices for the apartments were up to five Million INR initially. While, the Sunday 7th September 2003 issue of *The Economic Times*, put the South City mall as 'a shoppers' paradise,' the South-City stands tall like a space ship amidst narrow roads, bustling slums, local bazaars and houses of labouring classes. It aspires for 'life style revolution,' which would necessarily encourage widening of the roads, and construction of flyovers etc., by displacing local residents. Briefly, the construction of South-City promotes most definite and spatial changes in our urban geographies, by dislocating workers, dismantling factories, and destroying local (old) houses.
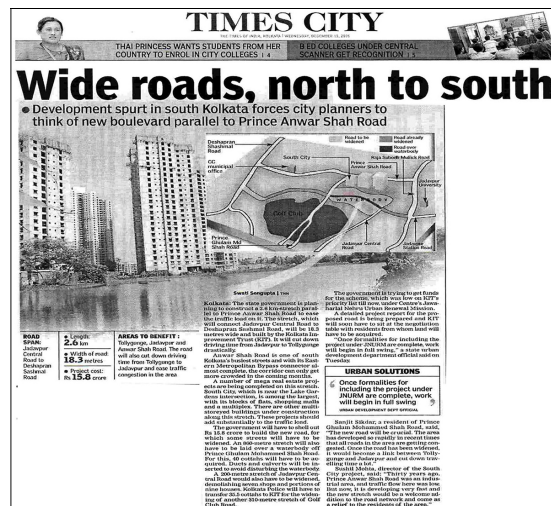

Fig. 8: *The Times of India*, Wednesday, 15th December 2005, scanned image.

Fig. 9: The Mall and its deck like interior, photograph by the author.

Fig. 10: South-City Housing Complex, photograph by the author

Fig. 11: The other side of development, photograph by the author

Whispering waterscapes

While the South-City construction is almost over, about eight years back, the construction was disrupted owing to various protests connected to issues of land, labour and the question of vanishing water-bodies, which have apparently been devoured during construction. For instance, one major case that came up was connected to the question of environment. A huge water-body is located adjacent/behind the South-City, and about 1.31 acres of this water-body was located within the premises of the Usha Factory. By the end of 2005, *Vasundhara*, an environmental activist group, noted that a large section of the water-body had disappeared and the towers III and IV were being constructed on that space. *Vasundhara* wrote to the Governor, the Chief Minister, to the Fishery Department, as well as to the Pollution Control Board (PCB).

Thus, PCB ordered a probe, and later, the PCB committee submitted a report, which was not particularly in favour of the builders; nevertheless, the constructions within the South-City premises continued. Ranu Ghosh, a cinematographer working on a project for Sarai (CSDS, Delhi) elaborates how, "22 species of birds and 32 species of flora around this jheel [lake] – and several species of butterflies and grasshoppers" may have vanished.[59] Among other issues, Ghosh's work (which includes a film with an out of job labourer from the Usha factory) underlines the structural changes of the city.

Henri Lefebvre (1974) writing about 'social space,' insisted that '*(Social) space is a (social) product'.* He explained on the 'science of space' (underlining the physical space as well as the mental space) and emphasized how we confront 'an indefinite multitude of spaces'. He asserts that (1974: 8), "each one plied upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, and global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, of (energy) flows, and so on." In response to this, Harvey (1979) had written about 'Social Justice and the City,' and had theorized problems of geography and 'ghetto formation.' Interestingly, while globalization tries to repress such spaces (the ghetto for instance), in its attempt to construct a shopping mall or a multiplex cinema etc., perhaps, such 'spaces' are rarely spaces of total control. Sometimes, as we see in the case of the South-City mall, the repressed return with great vibrancy to lay its claim on this 'space-ship' as it were. Thus, ironically, in the recent past, the South-City premises have also been used for suicide. During September 2012, when a mother and two daughters from the nearby locality entered the housing, parked their car and jumped to death from the terrace (36th Floor) of the housing estate, it clearly disturbed the certitude of development. [60] Partha Chatterjee (2004) writes about urban structures and cultures of Kolkata, from the 1950s and 1960s and the nature of its growth through the 1970s and 1980s. Further, he describes (2004: 145) how in the (imagined) post-industrial, global, 'Bourgeois' metropolis, "globally urban, consumer lifestyle and aesthetic will take root. There will be segregated and exclusive spaces for shops, restaurants, arts, and entertainment…." Of course, he hopes that, our social conditions will 'corrupt' such cities, which then will be 'impure' and 'inefficient'. The last section of the paper looks into this 'corrupted' nature of the South-City, with its 'impurities' and many cities.

Conclusion: Persistence of sub-cities

Structured like a ship or whatsoever, there are 'decks' or rather various levels of shops in the South-City mall. The centre is left vacant for bumper sales and for special occasions including the festivals; besides, the shiny floors reflect the starry lights placed above. There are shops, and rows of shops, with mannequins, glass windows and mirrors, as well as other reflective panels that hold up to us our idealised self-images. Then there are CCTVs and digital billboards that monitor us and play with moving images and aspirations. There are also multiplexes that screen recent Bollywood films and Hollywood blockbusters. Often, during the weekends or during the festivals, several working class families living in close proximity (and dressed up 'for the mall') queue up to enter this labyrinth of desire. These visits, which were particularly popular when the Mall was open for public in January 2008, seem to replicate the cultures of visiting local fairgrounds. The variety of people and their costumes and gestures, reminds one of the varied

---

[59] From Ranu Ghosh's 5th Posting on www.sarai.net
[60] See http://www.ibtimes.co.in/articles/379694/20120901/kolkata-3-women-jumps-high-rise-apartment.htm

and vibrant popular and sub-cultures, and seem to replicate the frenzied vivacity and spontaneity of (Hindu festivals like) *Durga Puja* or the (Islamic) *Eid*.[61]

Fig. 12. The neighbourhood fish- market, photograph by the author

In a sense, the South-City mall is a 'Foucault's ship',[62] that is located on a 'fairground' of sorts (or in a locality that comprises middle class apartments, as well as local shops, bazaar, dirty makeshift huts, old Mosques, college, and cemeteries). Jameson (1984)[63] would describe a place like the South-City mall as the 'new total space' that 'corresponds a new collective practice, a new mode in which individuals move and congregate, something like the practice of a new and historically original kind of hyper-crowd'. Moreover, besides the obvious environmental and structural breaches, the complex is causing water, electricity and traffic problems for the neighbourhood. Nonetheless, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, this 'space' is *also* a 'place' for everyday negotiations. Additionally, while this 'gigantic ship' with the sweet perfumed air and pleasant music draws us in, and as the ever burgeoning middle-classes armed with credit cards proceed towards the mall, the 'outside', which it aspires to cut off or ignore and repress, often returns like the 'real', leaving its (dirty foot) marks on the glossy glass skin of the mall.

Therefore, through a study and visual documentation of the South-City mall and its adjacent areas, which is situated in Kolkata's cosmopolitan section (comprising disparate classes and communities), this project does not merely highlight the fallouts of mal-development in the country and the city. It also shows how such growths remain unfinished, and is dented by various factors including the doggedness of the so-called poor people and slum dwellers living close to the mall. Besides, the fact that the local street markets and shops are seemingly flourishing illustrates the precarious ways in which post-colonial economy and culture function. More importantly, it draws our attention to the relationship between the street shops and the big brands housed in the mall. For instance, the mall footpath is occupied by rows of shops selling pirated DVDs (of films showing in the mall multiplexes) and fast food.[64] Furthermore, a huge labour force that resides in the neighbouring colonies seems to seize their rights to enter such spaces by joining in as sales persons in the numerous boutiques and restaurants. Indeed,

---

[61] See Anjan Ghosh (2011)

[62] See http://www.foucault.info./documents/heteroTopia/ however, the intention here is *not* to borrow from Foucault's theory, *instead* to use the term (like 'Noah's Ark') in order to emphasize South-City's ship like structure.

[63] See Fredric Jameson (2006) (first published in 1984 as "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", in *New Left Review*, Vol.146, pp.53-92)

[64] Also see Ravi Sundaram (2010)

this split existence of Kolkata's one of the most expensive housing cum shopping mall alongside the city's one of the oldest slum areas as well as respectable middle-class *para* (locality), indicates that if the Global *imaginaire* tries to suppress and dominate the local, sometimes this hierarchy is destroyed through sub-cultures (like nearby *melas*/fair or loud programmes and festivity at the street corners etc.,), and sub-spaces (like the persistence of local bazaar, single theatre, cemetery etc.). And, as a huge number of 'non-buying' working class families frequently queue up during the weekends to signify their presence, one can hear their footsteps whispering as it were, as they leave their soiled footprints on middle-class aspirations and on the glassy-glossy floor of the South-city mall.

References

Appadurai, Arjun (1990) 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy' in Featherstone, Mike (Ed.), *Global Culture, Nationalism, Globalisation and Modernity*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 295-310.

Banerjee, A. V., Gertler, P. J., & Ghatak, M. (2002) 'Empowerment and efficiency: Tenancy reform in West Bengal', *Journal of political economy*, *110*(2), pp. 239-280.

Basu, Anustup (2011) 'A Memorialization without Destinying: A Revisitation of JU Media Lab's National Instruments Archive Project', *Journal of the Moving Image*, 10, pp. 122-139.

Biswas, Moinak (2010) *Sarai Reader 08: Fear*, CSDS, New Delhi, pp. 196-205.

Bose, Nirmal Kumar (1965) 'Calcutta: A premature metropolis', *Scientific American*, 213, pp. 91-102.

Chatterjee, Joya (1994) *Bengal Divided, Hindu communalism and partition*, *1932-1947*, (South Asian Studies 57), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chatterjee, Partha (1997) Our *Modernity*, Rottemdram/Dakar: EPHIS & CODESRIA.

Chatterjee, Partha (2004) *The Politics of the Governed, Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World,* New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Dicks, Bella (2003) *Culture on Display, The Production of Contemporary Visitabilty,* London: Open University Press.

Ghosh, Anjan (2011) 'Contested Spaces: Puja and its Publics in Calcutta' in Ghosh et al (ed.) *Theorizing The Present, Essays For Partha Chatterjee,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Harvey, David (2004) *Social Justice and the City*, London: Edward Arnold.

David Harvey (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jameson, Fredric (2006) *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University.

Lefebvre, Henri (1974) *The Production of Space* (Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Nair, P. Thankappan (2005) 'The Growth and Development of Old Calcutta' in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta, The Living City*, Vol. 1, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 10-23.

Sarkar, Sumit (1984) *Modern India*, *1885-1947*, Delhi: Macmillan India Ltd.

Sundaram, Ravi (2010) *Pirated Modernity, Delhi's Media Urbanism*, London/ New York/ New Delhi: Routledge.

Zitzewitz, K. (2009) 'The Moral Economy of the Street: The Bombay Paintings of Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan,' *Third Text*, *23*(2), pp. 151-163.